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Review of Géza Alföldy, Römische Sozialgeschichte, Wiesbaden 2011

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Géza Alföldy, *Römische Sozialgeschichte*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011. Pp. 399. ISBN 9783515098410. €21.90.

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The reworking of a book written about 40 years ago—with the last reedition nearly 30 years old—is obviously a huge and thankless task. That the author and the publishing house undertook this is understandable, if one considers the tremendous success the book has had: After nine years it was already in its third edition and this edition was translated into English, French, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish. Several thousand copies of these different editions must have been sold and, of course, no one who dabbles with Roman Social History can afford to ignore it.

Certainly, the book met and will still meet with much criticism. But although these critiques are often well deserved, Alföldy rightly states that there is as yet no other book that tackles the complicated question of social macrostructure from Early Rome to the fall of the Roman West. The nearest ‘misses’ are probably Friedrich Vittinghoff’s 206 pages on Roman Imperial and Late Antique Society and now Michael Peachin’s *Oxford Handbook on Social Relations in the Roman World*.¹

The obvious question to the reviewer will be how much has been achieved by reworking the old book. First of all, with slightly larger line spacing and footnotes instead of endnotes the publishing house has made the book more comfortable for the reader. If one compares the number of pages and especially the number of footnotes, it is easy to see that Alföldy invested much time and processed lots of literature: The length of the book increased from 212 pages in 1984 to now 399 and from 251 to 799 footnotes.

The overall structure of the book is still the same: Seven chronological chapters deal with Roman social structure from the beginning to roughly 400 BC, from 400 to 200 BC, 200 to 135 BC, 135 to 31 BC, 31 BC to about AD 193, AD 193 to 284 and finally AD 284 to 478. There is, however, some reorganisation of the subchapters of the last three main parts: Within the chapter on the Principate the subchapter “Weitere gehobene Stände und Schichten” is superseded by three subchapters called “Der Ritterstand” (162-168), “Die städtischen Eliten: die Ordines decurionum” (169-175) and “Weitere städtische Eliten und hochgestellte Gruppen: Seviri Augustales und weitere reiche Liberti, Familia Caesaris” (175-179). Part VI, “Die Krise des Römischen Reiches und der soziale Strukturwandel” in the third edition, is renamed “Die Krise des Römischen Reiches im 3. Jahrhundert und die römische Gesellschaft” (218-272). The first subchapter has changed its name as well and is now called “Die Umwandlungsprozesse im Imperium Romanum während des 3. Jahrhunderts” (218-229). The following subchapter of the third edition is split up into the subchapters “Der Senatorenstand” (229-233), “Der Ritterstand” (233-235), “Städtische Oberschichten” (235-239) and “Das Militär in der Gesellschaft des 3. Jahrhunderts” (239-242). While the next two subchapters show only minor variations in their titles (“Die Unterschichten,” 242-245 and “Der Wandel in der Sozialstruktur,” 245-254), at the end of the chapter there is a new subchapter named “Beschleunigter Wandel und Krise des Römischen Reiches” (254-272). Finally within the part on Late Antiquity instead of the subchapter “Die Oberschichten” there are now the subchapters “Die Führungsschicht” (284-293) and “Die Kurialen” (293-297). A major improvement is the extended bibliography that Alföldy added with the help of Angelos Chaniotis, Christina Kuhn, Michael Peachin and Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner.

Throughout the book there are minor additions, deletions, alterations in the wording and additions to the footnotes. The major reworking is however concentrated within the domains of Alföldy’s own research:

In chapter V (118-217) major additions concern the role of the emperor (126, 127-128, 130-131, 131-132), the army (139, 149-150, 206-207), the *Augustales* (175-178, 198), the *familia Caesaris* (178-179, 198), the liberation of slaves (189-190), the importance of the integration of the subdued (135, 211-212, 214), the importance of religion (126, 212) as well as delinquency and unrest (213, 214, 217). The *Augustales* are now considered as equivalent to an *ordo* and together with the members of the *familia Caesaris* (these only *cum grano salis*) as part of the “Oberschicht” (esp. 198, where at the end of the first sentence the words “die Oberschicht” inadvertently were omitted, and the figure of the “pyramid” on p. 196). Besides this alteration, the concept of the “Stände-Schichten-Struktur” and the “pyramid” (unfortunately still drawn in only two dimensions) are defended (201-205).

In chapter VI (218-272) Alföldy argues for interpreting the third century as a crisis of the Roman Empire. Accordingly, the first subchapter is nearly entirely rewritten as an extensive portrayal of the political (both internal and external), economic, mental and religious transformations that occurred and that justify designating the period as a crisis (218-229 using only some tiny pieces of the third edition). Furthermore, – as mentioned above – a new subchapter is added at the end. Here Alföldy acknowledges that the previously mentioned transformations were not restricted to the third century and that they affected the various parts of the empire differently (254-257, 263). But he vigorously refutes recent statements that call the “third-century-crisis” into question and stress continuities (259-272). Although overall I share Alföldy’s view on the crisis or crises, to my mind he often too readily discards arguments concerning discursive structures within the works of ancient authors (e. g. 259-260 and 268 against Christoph Schuler, Karl Strobel, Christian Witschel and Martin Zimmermann). And Witschel (*Krise – Rezession – Stagnation?*, Frankfurt 1999, 60-62) does not try to

“explain away” the petitions (in German often called “Hilferufe”) mainly recorded on inscriptions of the third century, but stresses additional ways of explaining them (244). Further additions concern the soldiers’ role in the third century (239, 240, 241-242), *collegia* (244) and social changes (247).

The chapter on Late Antiquity opens with a substantially rewritten subchapter that now incorporates new sections on the position of Christians (274-275), depopulation (276), eunuchs at the imperial court (278) and more recent studies that cast doubt on the “Zwangsstaat” of the later empire (277-278). Given this, the emphasis the third edition put on the compulsive character of the government in Late Antiquity is sometimes softened (e. g. 277 “zunehmend verschärfte Methoden” instead of “nur noch Zwangsmethoden”). Nevertheless Alföldy stresses the increasing pressure on the *curiales* (cf. the additions 294, 295 and 296) while acknowledging the new role of the bishops (297). The book now closes with some thoughts on the reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire: while the invasions of the barbarians obviously played an important part, according to Alföldy domestic factors should not be neglected (318- 319).

The fourth edition of Alföldy’s *Sozialgeschichte* is a book mainly interested in social macrostructures and their evolution. Readers looking for information on the Roman family, the role of women, living conditions, or education will be rather disappointed, as they will find only a few short remarks. Some amelioration is procured by the extensive bibliography that addresses these aspects of social history. Of course one can quibble about details: To classify the “Getreideempfänger” at Rome as a “Lumpenproletariat” (183) ignores the literature on the *plebs frumentaria* of recent years.² Furthermore, probably no student will find a source cited “Galenos (5,49)” (185). It would have been better to give the title (*De propriorum animi cuiuslibet affectuum dignotione et curatione*) with chapter and paragraph (9, 13) and to refer to the edition of the Corpus Medicorum Graecorum (vol. V 4,1,1, p. 33) instead of the rather old edition of Kühn (5,49 means: vol. V, p. 49). And certainly one can still wonder whether a model that tries to reconstruct an empirewide homogeneously stratified society is adequate, when there was little chance that a *colonus* from Lydia would ever meet a *decurio* from Irni.³ There also remains the question whether it is a useful idea to equate the Roman idea of *ordo* with the medieval and early modern term of “Stand” (i. e. estate).⁴

Summing up, students as well as scholars interested especially in social microstructures, socialization or social interaction would probably do better turning to Michael Peachin’s *Oxford Handbook*.⁵ For those interested in social macrostructures Alföldy’s *Sozialgeschichte* is still an important milestone and it is available now in a highly improved edition.

Notes:

^{1.} Friedrich Vittinghoff, *Gesellschaft*, in: Friedrich Vittinghoff (ed.), *Europäische Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Stuttgart 1990, 163-369; Michael Peachin (ed.), *Oxford Handbook on Social Relations in the Roman World*, Oxford 2011.

^{2.} See inter alia Adalberto Giovannini (ed.), *Nourrir la plèbe. Actes du colloque tenu à Genève les 28. et 29. IX. 1989 en hommage à Denis van Berchem*, Basel 1991.

^{3.} Cf. the doubts expressed from a provincial point of view in Jens Bartels, *Städtische Eliten im römischen Makedonien*, Berlin/New York 2008, 11-12 with further references.

^{4.} See the important article of Rolf Rilinger on *ordo* (now conveniently available in: Rolf Rilinger, *Ordo und dignitas*, Stuttgart 2007, 95-104) unfortunately not cited or listed in the bibliography.

^{5.} Note 1.

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